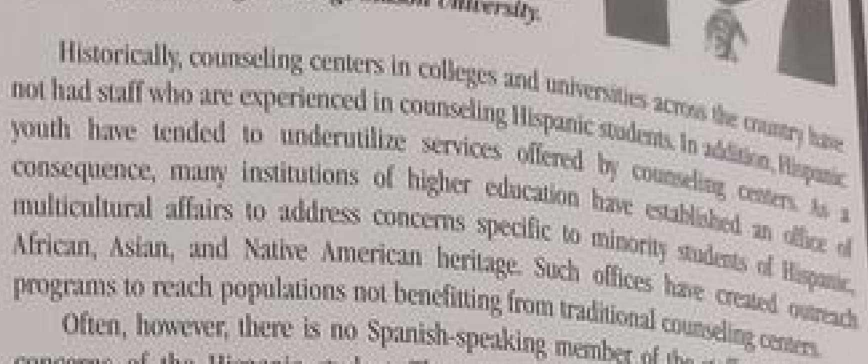
¡PUNTO FINAL!

Counseling Hispanics: Advice for Helpers



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In spite of the fact that the Hispanic population constitutes one of the largest subgroups in the United States, many professional therapy providers are at a loss on how best to communicate with and assist young Hispanics in high school and college to become fully contributing members of American society. There is a pressing need to improve the quality of counseling and advice given to Hispanic youth. Cultural differences, language barriers, substantial diversity of national origin within the Hispanic population, and counselor anxiety are no excuse for insufficient or inappropriate counseling.

Hispanic youth in junior high and high school have not been advised to register for school curricula that would allow them to compete for admission to higher education. This has to change in order for Hispanic youth to compete in a global society. Parents and teachers need to be informed of the significant role they can play in the education of Hispanic youth.

Counselors prepared for the 21st Century understand well that this is one of their tasks. Changing demographics demand that counselors shed their traditional role, which restricted advisement primarily to the school setting. It might be important and necessary for the counselor to visit the home of the Hispanic youth. Working with and informing the Hispanic families at an early stage in the development of their children allows them to have an active role in the success or failure of their offspring. There is a higher probability of success for Hispanic youth if the counselors, teachers, and parents work together as a team.

High school counselors need to build on the good work of their junior high counterparts by alerting Hispanic youth to the advantages of studying in the academy. Counselors should advise their students--prior to their senior year in high school--of the requirements for admission to the academy. An early orientation in the sophomore or junior year of high school can also teach Hispanic students what they can do in academics and extracurricular activities to prepare for college. This would increase the number of Hispanic youth who enter higher education.

Those Hispanic youth who overcome the obstacles and barriers to success in high school find that they once again have to turn to their inner strength to meet the challenges of university study. Feelings of loneliness, isolation, and stress are common among Hispanics in higher education. These feelings are known to have a negative impact on academic performance. Culturally competent college counselors are needed to counsel youth.

Historically, counseling centers in colleges and universities across the country have not had staff who are experienced in counseling Hispanic students. In addition, Hispanic youth have tended to underutilize services offered by counseling centers. As a consequence, many institutions of higher education have established an office of multicultural affairs to address concerns specific to minority students of Hispanic, African, Asian, and Native American heritage. Such offices have created outreach programs to reach populations not benefitting from traditional counseling centers.

Often, however, there is no Spanish-speaking member of the staff to address the concerns of the Hispanic student. There is an advantage to having their concerns addressed in their mother language. This is especially important when there is a need to discuss emotionally laden problems. For example, how would you like to be bilingual in English and Arabic with your mother language being English but your counselor can only communicate to you in Arabic? As any well-trained bilingual professional knows, most individuals have a larger feeling-level vocabulary with which to express themselves in their first language. The rate of success in the counseling relationship is likely to be increased if the client wants to speak in Spanish and has that as a viable option. Administrators in higher education need to be culturally sensitive and hire staff in counseling centers and the offices of multicultural affairs who are competent to counsel Hispanic students.

Hispanic students in colleges and universities in the United States have to encounter on a daily basis the normal problems that every student in higher education experiences as well as issues of discrimination and prejudice. Counselors from the dominant group might not feel comfortable counseling clients with minority-related problems. On the other hand, counselors need to examine their own attitudes toward race, discrimination, and prejudice if they want to be therapeutic helping clients who endure such problems. If the counselors do not deal with their own race-related issues, their clients will perceive of them as being conflicted and look elsewhere for counseling and guidance.

Hispanic community/university community partnerships can go a long way in providing guidance and role models for Spanish-heritage students on American campuses. Hispanic leaders can also be significant consultants to university leaders who plan counseling and guidance programs for students.



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